

## Incorporating Issues of Sexual Orientation in the Classroom: Challenges and Solutions

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### **Abstract:**

Family studies faculty have an opportunity and a responsibility to address issues related to the development and family lives of sexual minority individuals in graduate and undergraduate courses. This article identifies and discusses 6 challenges involving the incorporation of sexual orientation issues into the classroom: lack of student exposure to accurate information about sexual orientation, selecting a lecture topic, attitudes of intolerance among students, avoiding generalizations, making the topic of sexual orientation relevant to the lives of students, and instructor comfort level concerning the topic of sexual orientation.

### **Article:**

The past 30 years have seen dramatic social change with regard to attitudes toward homosexuality (Yang, 1997). Parallel to this change, legal, political, religious, and social issues related to same-sex sexual orientation have become frequent foci of media and public attention in recent years. Given the growing public awareness of and attention to these issues, family studies faculty have an opportunity and responsibility to address issues related to the development and family lives of sexual minority individuals in their undergraduate and graduate courses. Yet, some faculty members will have had limited personal experience with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) individuals; furthermore, most faculty members will have had little academic preparation for addressing these issues in the classroom (Allen, 1995; Allen & Demo, 1995).

Whether LGBT individuals and their families are addressed in an individual lecture or woven throughout the course content in an entire semester, the explicit decision to focus students' attention on the life experiences of persons whose sexual orientations differ from those of the majority is important for several reasons. First, attention to these issues is consistent with a teaching philosophy that emphasizes the overall diversity of human experience. Variation in sexual orientation should be considered no less important to students' understanding of human development than is variation in race, ethnicity, social class, or family structure. In addition, virtually all individuals, regardless of their own sexual orientations, will interact with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered individuals at some point during the course of their lives. Finally, family studies courses offer a special opportunity to inform students about sexual orientation as it is relevant to family life. As family studies faculty, we have a responsibility to ensure that our students receive research-based information concerning the experiences of a demographic group that is frequently either misrepresented or ignored.

The purpose of this article is to identify and discuss six specific challenges that we have found with respect to the incorporation of sexual orientation issues into the family studies classroom. These include:

- Lack of student exposure to accurate information about sexual orientation
- Selecting a lecture topic
- Attitudes of intolerance among students

- Avoiding generalizations
- Making the topic of sexual orientation relevant to the lives of students
- Instructor comfort level concerning the topic of sexual orientation.

We offer strategies that we have found to be effective for dealing with these challenges and for increasing the diversity of coverage of sexual orientation issues in the classroom. Strategies for teaching about sexual orientation have been addressed in previous issues of *Family Relations* (e.g., Allen, 1995); this article is the first to focus entirely on the challenges that accompany the decision to adopt a more inclusive approach within family studies courses.

Before we begin, it is important to provide a context for understanding our personal perspectives regarding this topic and to clarify the language used in this article. We approach issues of sexual orientation from quite different perspectives and social positions. Although we both emphasize the study of adolescence in our own work, one of us is a developmental psychologist by training, and the other is a sociologist. One of us is a heterosexual woman who studies parental and peer influences on adolescent well-being, and the other an "out" gay/bisexual man who focuses his research on adolescence and sexual orientation. Although one of us holds a "traditional" academic appointment, the other is a Cooperative Extension Specialist, conducting most of his teaching in the contexts of professional development for human services professionals, workshops for families and communities, or as a guest lecturer for campus courses. Despite our different backgrounds, we find common ground in our mutual commitment to teaching about sexual orientation. Our own differences (both personal and professional) serve to illustrate the importance of encouraging all family studies faculty to incorporate issues of sexual orientation into their classes. That attention to issues of diversity is not the sole responsibility of those faculty who happen to be members of the minority group in question has been addressed in other pedagogical writings (e.g., Marks, 1995; Thompson, 1995). Readers also may note that our training places both of us more toward the "child development" end of the "child development"—"family studies" continuum evident in many Human Development and Family Studies departments. Such an orientation may on occasion be evident in our choices of teaching examples. In discussion of research, our goal has been to be inclusive of the wide range of academic disciplines that have included attention to sexual orientation.

Regarding our use of language, we use the term "LGBT" but recognize that this term does not encompass the many identities, behaviors, or orientations that may be included within the study of sexual orientation. The term "family studies" is used in an inclusive manner and might include instruction in the disciplines of human development and family studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology, or other social sciences that focus on families. We refer to the "classroom" and include reflections from our experiences teaching not only in formal college classroom settings, but also in community settings. Finally, the term "we" is used throughout this paper to indicate the experiences and perspectives of either or both authors.

### **Challenge 1: Lack of Student Exposure to Accurate Information About Sexual Orientation**

Issues related to the experiences of LGBT individuals have, overall, not been well represented within the broader university curriculum. Before entering a family studies course, many students' understanding of sexual minority status may be limited to information obtained during conversations with friends and family and (often inaccurate) depictions of sexual minority individuals by the media. A family studies course can be the first setting in which students will have discussed LGBT issues in a serious manner or within an academic setting. Accordingly, regardless of the specific lecture topic selected, we have found that it is important to address two issues: the prevalence and origins of same-sex sexuality, and relevant language or definitions related to sexual orientation. First, our experiences have been that many students are uninformed and curious concerning the prevalence of LGBT status and its origins. Accordingly, we spend some time at the start of a lecture reviewing the literature concerning these issues (see Allen & Demo, 1995; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Michaels, 1996; Sell, Wells, & Wypij, 1995), regardless of the overall lecture focus. This also might provide the

opportunity for a brief discussion of the challenges of conducting research in this area, including social and political (Laumann et al.) as well as basic methodological (Bancroft, 1997) issues.

Second, all students need to be provided a basic vocabulary with which to discuss the life experiences of sexual minority individuals. Table 1 provides a list of some relevant terms with their definitions and useful references. We have found that presenting a list such as this one early in a course encourages student participation in class discussions by providing a language through which to phrase questions and comments, thus increasing the clarity of discussion. This list begins with the distinctions between three dimensions of sexual orientation: sexual identities, attractions, and behaviors (Laumann et al., 1994; Savin-Williams, 1989). It then provides terms for many common identity categories. It is important to discuss with students that, as is true in other minority communities, some words that are regarded as pejorative by the dominant culture have been "reclaimed" by sexual minority individuals. Words such as "gay" or "queer" are frequently used by LGBT people in reference to themselves. It is important to emphasize to students that when used by nonLGBT individuals, most of these words remain slurs.

### **Challenge 2: Selecting a Lecture Topic**

Clearly, no instructor can address the multitude of life experiences of LGBT individuals within the course of a single lecture (or, for that matter, a single course). To do so would be to reduce such experiences to an afterthought, as is the case in many textbooks when issues of sexual orientation are segregated to a "text box" or separate chapter (Allen, 1995). Still, we are asked on occasion to guest lecture on "sexual orientation" for family studies courses. This "guest lecturer" role provides some challenges in terms of how to avoid a segregated approach to discussing diversity in a context where the topic of sexual orientation may not have been raised previously with students.

We have found it helpful to structure such lectures around any of several more extensively researched topics related to the experiences of LGBT individuals. These might include:

- Theories regarding the origins of sexual orientation (Bem, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996)
- Models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1984; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000; Troiden, 1989) and critiques of those models (Diamond 1998; Oswald, 2000b; Rust, 1993, 1996)
- The coming-out experiences of sexual minority adolescents and young adults (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1998)
- Risk behavior among sexual minority adolescents and adults (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997)
- The effect on the family system of having an LGBT family member (Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray & Bowen, 1996; Oswald, 2000a, 2000b; Savin-Williams, 1998; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998)
- Parenting in LGBT families (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Flare & Richards, 1993; Patterson, 1992, 1995)
- The study of LGBT family life, including the implications of LGBT families for dominant theories and conceptions of "family" (Allen & Demo, 1995; Carrington, 1999; Weston, 1991)

By focusing on a more clearly delineated lecture topic, instructors are able to provide a less superficial picture of the life experiences of LGBT individuals and assist students in understanding the breadth and diversity of such experiences.

Although the topics listed above may be addressed in a single lecture, information about the life experiences of LGBT individuals can and should be addressed throughout the semester. Opportunities for incorporating sexual minority experiences and concerns within existing courses abound. One example pertains to courses on adolescent development, our own particular area of expertise. The coming-out experience might be incorporated into a discussion of family interactions (parent-child or sibling relations) or peer relationships. Sexual identity development fits well into discussions of identity achievement. When discussing adolescent risk behavior, LGBT adolescents can be included as an example of an "at-risk" population for substance abuse (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Garofalo et al., 1998; Remafedi, 1994; Rosario, Hunter & Gwadz, 1997), depression and suicidal ideation (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Gonsiorek, 1988; Hammelman, 1993; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994), and victimization (DuRant, Krowchuck, & Sinai, 1998; Garofalo et al.; Hershberger & D'Augelli; Hunter, 1990). Instructors can better represent the diversity and variability of individual experience during a discussion of the development of intimacy and dating relationships by explicitly acknowledging the existence and challenges of LGBT romantic relationships (Savin-Williams, 1994, 1996).

Table 1  
*Sexual Orientation and Family Studies: Some Relevant Terms and Definitions*

Sexual orientation	A person's self-concept as based on sexual or emotional attractions to other persons who are of the same sex (a homosexual orientation), the other sex (a heterosexual orientation), or both same and other sex (a bisexual orientation). Realization of this self-concept may be outwardly expressed as a sexual identity (see below), it may be privately acknowledged but not publicly expressed, or the individual may be unaware of it consciously. For further reading, including attention to "sexual identity" and "sexual behavior," see Laumann et al. (1994) and Savin-Williams (1989).
Sexual identity	Personally and outwardly identifying oneself as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and so forth. A consistent, enduring sense of the meanings that the sexual orientation and sexual behavior have for a person.
Sexual behavior	Actual sexual behavior between people. Sexual practices may or may not be consistent with a person's sexual identity or orientation.
Homosexual	A term used to refer to a person based on her or his same-sex sexual orientation, identity, or behavior; that is, sexual orientation, identity, and behavior are distinct dimensions of sexuality. For example, a person may engage in homosexual behavior but not identify himself or herself as homosexual; conversely, persons with same-sex orientations and identities may not engage in homosexual behavior.
Heterosexual	A term used to refer to a person based on her or his other-sex sexual orientation, identity, or behavior. Sometimes referred to as "straight." As commonly used, this term usually implies other-sex orientation, identity, and behavior. A person may, for example, identify herself as heterosexual but engage in homosexual behavior, however.
Bisexual	A term used to refer to a person whose sexual orientation, identity, or behavior is for both the same and other sex. This term is also a self-identity used by people who are sexually and emotionally attracted to persons of both genders.
Lesbian	A self-label for a woman whose sexual and emotional attractions are for other women.
Gay	A self-label for a man whose sexual and emotional attractions are for other men.
Queer	An historically pejorative term that has been reclaimed by LGBT groups as an affirmative identity when used among themselves (see Marks & Leslie, 2000, for a discussion of queer theory in the context of family studies).
Sexual minority	An umbrella term used to include persons representing many sexual identities; it has been used to include persons who have not self-identified based on a sexual identity but are in the minority based on their behavior, desires, or experiences.
Transsexual	A medical term coined in the 1950s to refer to individuals who not only desire to live in another gender, but to alter their bodies through surgeries and hormone treatments. Not all transsexuals choose to complete all possible surgeries or hormone treatments. Sometimes spelled "transsexual" (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Lesser, 1999; Tewksbury & Gagne, 1996).
Transgender	This term originally referred to individuals who lived in another gender but did not desire surgery, meaning "crossing gender" rather than "crossing sex." Increasingly, the term has been adopted by many to refer to everyone who transgresses social norms of sex and gender (Emerson & Rosenfeld, 1996; Lesser, 1999; Tewksbury & Gagne, 1996).
LGBT/LGBTQA	Abbreviations for "lesbian," "gay," "bisexual," "transgender," "questioning," and "ally." "Questioning" usually refers to young people who have not developed a stable sense of themselves as LGBT. "Ally" may be included in this abbreviation to include non-LGBT individuals who are supportive of LGBT rights.
Coming out	Disclosing the nature of one's LGBT identity to others. Because most people are presumed to be heterosexual, coming out is not a discrete life event but a lifelong process (see Allen, 1995, and Savin-Williams, 1998). Coming out may also be experienced by heterosexual family members of LGBT persons; when a child or sibling comes out, often family members experience coming out as the parent or sibling of a LGBT person (see Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996).
Heterosexism	The presumption that everyone is (or should be) heterosexual, resulting in the ignorance of or devaluing of LGBT behavior, orientations, identities, or relationships, and the labeling of these as deviant (see Allen, 1995; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991).
Homophobia	This term literally means "fear of homosexuals," but in recent decades, it has come to be used to indicate prejudice against sexual minority people (see Blumenfeld, 1992, and <i>Assault on Gay America</i> , available from Public Broadcasting Service Video).

Similar opportunities exist within other family studies courses. The experiences of LGBT parents and the health and wellbeing of their children might be included within infant development and parenting courses (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Hare & Richards, 1993; Patterson, 1992, 1995). Educators should include LGBT partnerships in discussions of relationship formation, family structure, and family dynamics—they provide the opportunity to (a) challenge hegemonic conceptualizations of family (Weston, 1991) and (b) explore inequality,

privilege, and disadvantage within family systems (Allen, 1995), Past work that arguably romanticizes egalitarianism within gay families (Weston) can be contrasted with recent work that challenges these notions, situating inequality within these families in the context of political, social, and economic constraints (Carrington, 1999).

### **Challenge 3: Attitudes of Intolerance Among Students**

Given widespread societal attitudes of intolerance for sexual diversity, it is perhaps inevitable that one of the greatest challenges for instructors when incorporating attention to diversity regarding sexual orientation into their courses will be the beliefs and behaviors of students. It has been our experience that although social sanctions prevent students from making inappropriate comments in class concerning race and ethnicity, social class, or religious beliefs, it is perceived by many students to be acceptable to make inappropriate remarks regarding sexual orientation. The challenge for instructors is complex. Balancing the strong emotions and opinions of students takes place within a context in which the goal is to provide all students with a clear understanding of the ways that sexual orientation plays a role in individual and family life. It is important to balance the need for sensitivity to students' religious beliefs while simultaneously creating a learning environment that is safe and includes acceptance for individual LGBT students. We offer the following suggestions to instructors as they deal with students' attitudes and belief systems in the classroom context.

It is important to communicate to students that across all disciplines, postsecondary education requires exposure to a variety of facts (scientific, historical, or behavioral) and research findings that may (and hopefully will) challenge students' existing knowledge bases. Throughout standard collegiate curriculum, students from all backgrounds are routinely required to study ideas that are not consistent with their personal experiences, histories, and faiths. Information about diversity in sexual orientation should be viewed in this same vein and should not be presented or perceived as an attack on students' cultural backgrounds or religious beliefs. When it is perceived as such by students, we remind those students that in most family studies courses, they are exposed to research on issues which their faiths may not condone but which are important aspects of understanding contemporary families and their well-being (*e.g.*, divorce or nonmarital pregnancy). Thus, just as we would not tolerate anti-Semitic or racist remarks within an academic setting, so, too, should we be clear that homophobic remarks or behaviors in the classroom are unacceptable. Thompson (1995) reminds us that, given the opportunity, other students often will take responsibility themselves to confront classmates who make inappropriate or homophobic remarks. Instructors can encourage such interactions by emphasizing that sensitivity and respect are group responsibilities.

A second issue that has come up in teaching settings is the idea that attention to sexual orientation affords sexual minority persons a privileged position in the classroom, or "special rights," the well-known language that has been used to argue against civil rights protection for LGBT people; When students suggest that attention to sexual orientation is "special treatment," we respond with a discussion of the degree to which heterosexuality is culturally privileged. We use this discussion as an opportunity to frame the study of same-sex sexual orientation as an issue that has been marginalized. Given this marginalization, we argue that it is appropriate for us to study and understand variability in sexual orientation in the lives of individuals and families.

We have adopted several different strategies for introducing the topic of sexual orientation in such a way so as to assist students in moving beyond their initial preconceptions concerning this topic. We have successfully anticipated inappropriate class comments by beginning class with a set of guidelines for thinking about sexual orientation. Such guidelines include (a) examining similarities in definitions of racism, sexism, and homophobia; (b) thinking about sexual orientation as a continuum, ranging from heterosexuality to homosexuality (and, accordingly, defining nonheterosexual orientations as variations from the cultural norm, not aberrations); and (c) addressing the concept of sexual orientation as not merely a lifestyle choice and not amenable to change.

We also believe it to be essential to impart upon students a feeling of empathy for the circumstances of all individuals whose lives are under discussion. The importance of empathy as a part of the "pedagogy of care"



has been raised by Thompson (1995) in discussion of teaching about ethnic minority families. It is no less relevant when teaching about LGBT individuals and their families, Approaches for encouraging students to develop empathy have been discussed by others and include encouraging students to examine issues and ask questions from the perspectives of the minority group in question (Thompson). In addition, we have encouraged students to step outside their safety zones when thinking about sexual orientation by walking them through scenarios in which they are themselves LGBT individuals or in which they, as heterosexuals, are pressured to change their own sexual orientations. In the course of such exercises, students can be encouraged as a group to think about such questions as "How does society treat LGBT people?" or "Can an individual choose to change his or her sexual orientation?" In the case of the latter, instructors should be aware of attention to "conversion therapy" for homosexuality in recent years. Students may have heard conflicting information regarding whether same-sex sexual orientation can be "cured." In such instances, we would indicate to students not only that such therapy is unthinkable for many LGBT individuals, but also that there is no existing scientific evidence that sexual orientation conversion therapies have been successful in the long term (Just the Facts Coalition, n.d.).

Other teaching strategies that may assist students in increasing levels of empathy and awareness of the perspectives and circumstances of LGBT individuals include selective showing of videos during class. Videos we have used in the past include *All God's Children* (available from Woman Vision Video), which examines the church lives and faith communities of African American LGBT persons, and *Assault on Gay America* (available from Public Broadcasting Service Video), which examines the growing public acceptance of homosexuality and concurrent rise in acts of violence against LGBT persons (for other video recommendations, see Allen 1995). Homophobia exercises that might be adapted for in-class use are available through Blumenfeld (1992).

#### **Challenge 4: Avoiding Generalizations**

When presenting social science research findings to students, instructors frequently run the risk of painting the experiences of groups of individuals with overly broad strokes. Students may leave lectures with the impression that *all* children with parents who are involved in their education will be successful academically or that *all* adolescent marriages will end in divorce. Similarly, when presented with information on LGBT individuals and families, students might leave with the impression that LGBT people and their life experiences are uniform and predictable. Instructors may circumvent such misconceptions by emphasizing differences between "average" group experiences and the varying experiences of LGBT individuals (Allen, 1995; Demo & Allen, 1996). Just as is true for heterosexuals, LGBT individuals vary in terms of gender, ethnicity, social class, occupation, the presence of physical and emotional disabilities, and place of residence. In addition, they may vary according to status on characteristics specific to LGBT individuals, such as whether they have come out to significant others in their lives (see Allen & Demo, 1995).

Although researchers and teachers alike are quick to combine individuals from varying sexual minority categories (e.g., combining lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual individuals under the term "LGBT"), there are significant differences in the life experiences of individuals within these different groups. For example, a study comparing gay, lesbian, and married heterosexual couples found that although both gay partners and lesbian partners reported higher autonomy than did heterosexual partners, lesbian couples reported more relationship equality than did either heterosexual or gay couples (Kurdek, 1998). Research on sexual minority adolescents provides several additional examples. Studies indicate that gay men may be aware of their same-sex attractions at an earlier age than are lesbians (Saghir & Robins, 1973), whereas bisexuals may self-identify at later ages than both gay men and lesbians (Rust, 1993; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). Furthermore, a recent study of the school experiences of sexual minority youth reported that youth with bisexual romantic attractions are most likely to report lower grades and troubles at school (Russell, Seif, & Throng, in press). Finally, although limited research has compared the experiences of LGBT youth from different racial and ethnic background, a recent study found that White sexual minority youth may differ from Black, Asian, and Hispanic youth in their school experiences (Russell & Truong, in press). Among sexual minority youth in the study, only those who were White reported low grades, negative school attitudes, and low educational expectations compared with heterosexual peers of the same race or ethnicity. The findings suggest

that the experience of a sexual minority status may operate in different ways for youth with different racial or ethnic minority backgrounds.

### **Challenge 5: Making the Topic of Sexual Orientation Relevant to the Lives of Students**

Prevalence statistics would lead to the conclusion that fewer than 1 in 10 postsecondary students will ultimately come to identify themselves as members of a sexual minority. An additional number of students will, at the time they hear a lecture on this topic, have experienced interactions with friends or family members who have come out regarding their sexual orientations. Still, even though there has been increasing public attention to same-sex sexual orientation, for many university students the topic of sexual orientation seems inapplicable to their own life experiences. On the other hand, many students believe that they are the only individuals in the class who have a family member or friend who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual and that their experiences with same-sex sexual orientation are unusual. We have begun lectures on sexual orientation by asking how many individuals in the classroom have a significant person in their lives who is LGBT, whether a family member, friend, or themselves. Students often are surprised that so many fellow classmates have had experience with same-sex sexual orientation; many will never have talked with others about it. This exercise eases some tensions among students who may have felt that they were the "only ones" to have dealt with these issues.

It also has been our experience that the relevance and importance of this topic is clearer to students when they learn that others in their class share similar experiences and when they are given opportunities to apply the material presented in class to more "real-life" events. One method we have used is to divide classes into small groups at the end of a class period. Students then work together to write paragraphs delineating what they, as parents, would want to say to an adolescent child who has just told them of their sexual minority status. Similar scenarios could be enacted in which students develop responses to friends who have come out to them or plan how they might handle coming out to a family member if they were LGBT. These exercises challenge students to put sexual orientation issues into a family context and to play active roles in assessing the impact of sexual orientation on family relationships.

### **Challenge 6: Instructor Comfort Level Concerning the Topic of Sexual Orientation**

It is to be expected that individual faculty will vary in the extent to which they feel comfortable incorporating information about the experiences and development of sexual minority individuals within their courses. In addition to the lack of training that academicians receive for addressing these issues in the classroom (Allen, 1995), a lack of comfort may originate in (a) uncertainty regarding how to introduce a topic that is politically controversial, (b) concerns regarding anticipated student response to such information, (c) a lack of self-perceived expertise regarding this subject matter, or (d) even a more generalized hesitancy to discuss sexuality in an academic context. Bearing in mind the broad array of potential origins of instructor discomfort with this lecture topic, we offer the following suggestions.

First, instructors should recognize that it not necessary to be an expert on sexual minority research to incorporate this topic into a course. An instructor whose expertise lies in the area of intergenerational relationships, but is charged with teaching a child development course, should feel no less qualified to discuss research on sexual minority individuals than to present information about adolescent identity formation, parenting styles, or attachment research—all of which would be commonly included in such a course. The reference list for this article should provide a good starting point for obtaining accurate information concerning current research on LGBT issues. Of course, instructors occasionally will need to answer student questions with "I don't know" or refer them to an appropriate outside source. Students often are appreciative of instructors' willingness to admit that they are not experts within a specific field and will make use of referrals to the appropriate literature to uncover the answers to their own questions.

Instructors who wish to incorporate the experiences of LGBT individuals into their courses also should not feel undue pressure to make immediate and substantial changes to their course syllabi. A first step toward gradually increasing levels of comfort with discussion of LGBT-related topics might be merely to practice working the terms "gay" and "lesbian" into class lectures and discussions. As instructors' levels of comfort and confidence

increase, portions of existing lectures may be reworked to reflect the experiences of LGBT youth. Finally, instructors may wish to develop new lectures focusing on specific topics within the research literature on sexual orientation as suggested earlier in this article. There may even be advantages to delaying the development of such lectures until a course has been taught a few times. Not only will instructors feel more confident concerning preparation for a course, but they also will gain valuable insights concerning the aspects of the LGBT experience that are of greatest interest to and relevance for their students. For example, after several semesters of teaching adolescent development courses, we found that students were especially curious about the family experiences of LGBT adolescents. Accordingly, we developed a lecture for these courses that considered the coming-out experiences of LGBT adolescents and their subsequent relationships with family members. It is our general perspective that information about sexual orientation should be integrated into "existing family studies courses. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that because this is a sensitive social issue, such integration will take time and may develop over the course of several years.

## Conclusion

Sexual orientation is a topic that has not received adequate attention within family studies courses. This topic is of great importance for many contemporary families. It was once true that attention to sexual orientation was not included in family studies courses because there was too little research available, and we literally had no more than anecdotal information about LGBT issues in the context of families. As public interest in LGBT lives has grown over the past decades, so, too, has research on this subject within our discipline(s). We argue that more attention should be given to sexual orientation within family studies courses and that, ideally, emphasis on sexual orientation should be holistically integrated throughout our curriculums.

Providing education about this and other culturally sensitive issues can be challenging. Nonetheless, we believe that integrating issues related to sexual orientation into family studies courses has both scientific and social value. It is clear that Western cultures are changing; the visibility and acceptance of sexual minorities are major changes that have affected family life in recent times. Information and education about sexual orientation within the context of the contemporary family provides students with important knowledge that they will need to live in increasingly diverse communities. Ultimately, it may provide them with life skills that will influence their present and future family lives,

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